***A/AN***

If the word following begins with a vowel sound, the word you want is

"an": "Have an apple, Adam." If the word following begins with a

consonant, but begins with a vowel sound, you still need "an": "An X-ray

will show whether there's a worm in it." It is nonstandard and often

considered sloppy speech to utter an "uh" sound in such cases.

The same rule applies to initialisms like "NGO" (for "non-governmental

organization"). Because the letter N is pronounced "en," it's "an NGO"

but when the phrase is spoken instead of the abbreviation, it's "a

non-governmental organization."

When the following word definitely begins with a consonant sound, you

need "a": "A snake told me apples enhance mental abilities."

Note that the letter Y can be either a vowel or a consonant. Although it

is sounded as a vowel in words like "pretty," at the beginning of words

it is usually sounded as a consonant, as in "a yolk."

Words beginning with the letter U which start with a Y consonant sound

like "university" and "utensil" also take an "a": "a university" and "a

utensil." But when an initial U has a vowel sound, the word is preceded

by "an": it's "an umpire," "an umbrella," and "an understanding."

See also "an historic."

***ACADEMIA***

Although some academics are undoubtedly nuts, the usual English-language pronunciation of "academia" does not rhyme with "macadamia." The third syllable is pronounced "deem." Just say "academe" and add "ee-yuh."

However, there's an interesting possibility if you go with

"ack-uh-DAME-ee-yuh: although some people will sneer at your lack of

sophistication, others will assume you're using the Latin pronunciation and being learned.

***ACCEPT/EXCEPT***

If you offer me Godiva chocolates I will gladly accept them--except for

the candied violet ones. Just remember that the "X" in "except" excludes

things--they tend to stand out, be different. In contrast, just look at

those two cozy "Cs" snuggling up together. Very accepting. And be

careful; when typing "except" it often comes out "expect."

***ADVICE/ADVISE***

"Advice" is the noun, "advise" the verb. When Ann Landers advises

people, she gives them advice.

***ADVISER/ADVISOR***

"Adviser" and "advisor" are equally fine spellings. There is no

distinction between them.

***AFFECT/EFFECT***

There are five distinct words here. When "affect" is accented on the

final syllable (a-FECT), it is usually a verb meaning "have an influence

on": "The million-dollar donation from the industrialist did not affect

my vote against the Clean Air Act."

Occasionally a pretentious person is said to affect an artificial air of

sophistication. Speaking with a borrowed French accent or ostentatiously

wearing a large diamond ear stud might be an affectation. In this sort

of context, "affect" means "to make a display of or deliberately

cultivate."

Another unusual meaning is indicated when the word is accented on the

first syllable (AFF-ect), meaning "emotion." In this case the word is

used mostly by psychiatrists and social scientists--people who normally

know how to spell it.

The real problem arises when people confuse the first spelling with the

second: "effect." This too can be two different words. The more common

one is a noun: "When I left the stove on, the effect was that the house

filled with smoke." When you affect a situation, you have an effect on

it.

The less common is a verb meaning "to create": "I'm trying to effect a

change in the way we purchase widgets." No wonder people are confused.

Note especially that the proper expression is not "take affect" but

"take effect"--become effective. Hey, nobody ever said English was

logical: just memorize it and get on with your life.

The stuff in your purse? Your personal effects.

The stuff in movies? Sound effects and special effects.